

Chapter 5

Intimate Partner Violence in China



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5.1 Author Background

Currently I am a second-year PhD student in the Department of Family Science at University of Maryland in the USA. I am from China and grew up in a rural area in Northeast China, where traditional beliefs about gender roles are more accepted. After graduating from the Master's program of Social Work in Peking University of China, I decided to pursue a degree in Couple and Family Therapy (CFT) at Kansas State University (K-State) in the USA. At the CFT program of K-State, I was fortunate to work with Dr. Sandra Stith as my advisor on research projects related with intimate partner violence (IPV). For my thesis, I looked at the phenomenon of female perpetration of IPV in dating relationships among Chinese college students, a topic rarely discussed in the Chinese IPV literature. This idea occurred to me because in my personal experience, I have realized that IPV is often bidirectional and it is not uncommon for Chinese women to be abusive toward their partners, especially verbally and emotionally. Specifically, in my thesis, I looked at how relationship factors are associated with IPV perpetration among female college students in China. Besides my current PhD studies, I also work as a couple and family therapist in a counseling organization in China. Most of my clients shared with me their traumatic experiences of witnessing their parents' violence when they were young. IPV in China continues to be a research interest of mine, and I hope I can introduce and adapt some of the evidence-based IPV therapy models to China in the future.

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5.2 Country Overview

The People's Republic of China (China) is the world's most populous country and the third largest country by size in the world. There are 56 ethnic groups in China with 91.5% being Han and the remaining 55 being minority groups. China, officially the People's Republic of China (PRC), is a one-party sovereign state. The country is ruled under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. Since economic reforms in 1978, China's economy has been one of the fastest growing in the world, and this has dramatically changed family structure and people's lives. To be a member of the Communist Party of China, an individual must not have a religious affiliation. However, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Chinese Buddhism) significantly shape Chinese culture, and these beliefs still deeply and widely influence Chinese families and society despite the recent dramatic changes in people's lives (Zhang & Zhao, 2018). Another important feature of China is that it has a sharp rural-urban divide in terms of income, education, job opportunities, healthcare, housing, and values. Due to this divide, and the rapid economic development in China in the past 30 years, China has witnessed an increase in population mobility from rural to urban areas for job opportunities. In most cases, the traditional breadwinners of households, men, migrate to big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, and leave their wives and children at home. The long distance and long-time separation also put family structure and unity into risk (Tang & Lai, 2008).

5.3 Intimate Partner Violence in China

Domestic violence in China is an enormous and multi-faceted issue. It is intertwined with traditional Chinese beliefs favoring gender inequality and family unity and with societal beliefs that devalue women (Zhao, 2000). It is also compounded by current political and economic challenges in China. Currently, there is a lack of systematically collected official and national data on the prevalence of domestic violence in China (Zhang & Zhao, 2018). According to a review of 19 empirical studies with a total of 49,201 adult respondents in China between 1987 and 2006, on average, 19.7% of women in China had experienced violence perpetrated by their male intimate partners in their lifetime, and prevalence of past year violence was 16.8% (Tang & Lai, 2008). Among various types of IPV, psychological violence was the most common (42.6% for lifetime and 37.3% for in the last year), followed by physical violence (14.2% and 6.7%) and sexual violence (9.8% and 5.4%) (Tang & Lai, 2008). A recent review of the literature examining the prevalence of domestic violence in China from 1997 to 2016 revealed slightly different results from Tang and Lai's 2008 study. This review found a range of 17.4–24.5% for lifetime psychological violence against women, 2.3–5.5% for physical violence, and 0.3–1.7% for sexual violence against women using national survey data (Yang et al., 2019). It was reported that approximately 24.7% of married women had

experienced some form of domestic violence by All China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 2011 (Zhang & Zhao, 2018).

In China, the concept of "domestic violence" (*Jia ting bao li*) was first introduced in 1995 in an official government report. Before that, it was long known as "wife beating" (Zhao, 2000). Historically, laws against "domestic violence" in China tended to be limited within the context of family, based on formally registered marriage. Therefore, legal protection was not available for women who lived with their intimate partners without the official marital status (Zhang & Zhao, 2018). Therefore, this concept is more commonly referred to as "domestic violence" instead of "intimate relationship violence" in China, reflecting a narrow view of abuse in the setting of "domestic" environment. In this chapter, I will mainly use the term of "domestic violence" to refer to the violence between intimate partners, as this is what is mainly used in the current law, policy, and public in China.

Similarly, women who suffer from domestic violence from their former husbands, which has been a major source of abuse in China, are also excluded from the legal protection. Internationally, it is believed that domestic violence is composed of not only physical abuse but also emotional and sexual abuse. However, it appears that China has adopted a narrow view of "violence" as mainly acts of physical violence, overlooking or even excluding emotional and sexual abuse in the definition of domestic violence. In addition, many Chinese people dispute the concept of marital rape because they think it is an intrinsic part of being "virtuous wives" to always be sexually available to their husbands (Zhao, 2000). Under this strict definition, many women may find their subjective experiences minimized or invalid, thus adding more difficulties to seeking assistance from police and other social service organizations, which can also lead to the problem under-reporting (Tang & Lai, 2008).

5.3.1 Traditional Cultural Beliefs, Values, and Practices in China

Throughout China's long history, domestic violence used to be seen neither as a crime nor as a social problem to be addressed by the government or public, as it was wrongly perceived as acceptable (Tang & Lai, 2008; Zhao, 2000). Largely, these beliefs about domestic violence were heavily influenced by traditional cultural beliefs and ongoing economic and political changes. Culturally, China has a long history of traditional male-dominated culture, and it has been heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy that advocates for patriarchal beliefs and rigid gender roles (Zhao, 2000). China has developed various doctrines succinctly reflecting men's dominating and women's inferior roles. For example, "Xian qi liang mu" specifies that a model woman should be a virtuous wife and a good mother, and "Nu zi wu cai bian shi de" further prescribes that women are virtuous when they stay at home and do not waste their time in pursuing their education and career (Tang & Lai, 2008). A man also was entitled to beat his wife to discipline her. There are old

Chinese sayings that depict wife beating as reasonable and even necessary, for example, “I bought my horse and married my wife. I can ride them and beat them as I like” and “If you go three days without beating your wife, she will climb up on the roof and move away all the tiles” (Xu et al., 2001). This kind of violence is often defended as men are executing “rules of family” (*jia fa*) in order to put women in the right place in the family (Tang & Lai, 2008). With the above rigid gender norms and beliefs, both men and women are socialized to believe that men are entitled to use violence over women to assert power and authority in the family and women are supposed to be submissive to their husbands. Domestic violence is generally believed to be a “private matter” (Zhao, 2000).

Multiple regional surveys have shown that domestic violence is more serious in rural areas where traditional attitudes toward women are more deeply and widely accepted (Zhao, 2000). Liu and Chan (1999) conducted a study of domestic violence in China and looked at stories of battered women in rural China and found that “enduring violent situations is the major theme that summarizes the lives of the participants” (p. 1475) and that women passively accepted wife abuse under the influences of cultural values. For example, one woman said, “If I do something wrong, my husband can beat me. I have my husband to discipline me, so it is not my mother-in-law and brother-in-law’s business to beat me” (Liu & Chan, 1999, p. 1477); “How can you apply for divorce when you quarrel and fight with your husband? In the village, what couple does not quarrel? It is impossible for them to get divorced”; and “Divorce must have appropriate grounds, beating is not a good one” (Liu & Chan, 1999, p. 1478). Based on these stories, we can see that these women believed that their husbands are entitled to beat them if they “misbehave,” and violence is a small thing, whereas divorce is a big issue.

5.3.2 *Economic and Social Changes in China*

There have been rapid economic and social changes in China since the 1980s, and it has brought increased educational and employment opportunities for its citizens. With greater access to education and employment, Chinese women started to challenge the power structure in traditional Chinese families, and this may have increased levels of anger in husbands and conflict within couples, and couples may use violence to resolve this conflict (Tang & Lai, 2008). In addition, Western ideas of gender equality and feminism have been introduced into China, and modern Chinese women are influenced to become more assertive to fight for what they need from their relationships. For example, more women are initiating divorce applications when they realize they are not happy in the current relationship, which challenges male authority in the family and overall society (Tang & Lai, 2008). Another important social change was the introduction of the one-child policy in the 1950s.

Influenced by this policy, the younger generation grew up in a single-child family environment where they received undivided attention and love from their parents and grandparents. For young women specifically, seen as precious and as “a pear in the palm,” they are even more confident to embrace their power and rights in their intimate relationships and are less tolerant of violence from their partners (Wang & Petula, 2007).

Under this context, I looked at the female perpetration of violence in Chinese college dating relationships and its relationship risk and protective factors (Du et al., 2020). Traditionally, men are the primary perpetrators of IPV, yet females also perpetrate IPV against their male partners (Chen & Chan, 2019). For example, in my study, I found that 40.8% of the female Chinese college students reported perpetrating minor physical IPV, 19.6% reported perpetrating severe physical IPV, 65.6% reported perpetrating minor psychological IPV, and 44.1% reported perpetrating severe psychological IPV against current or former partners (Du et al., 2020). In addition, my research also suggested that lack of anger management skills, communication problems, and lack of conflict resolution skills play an important role in college women’s experiences of perpetrating violence toward their partners. I encourage future studies to include male victimization into their studies and to develop gender-based intervention programs to address these problems related to female IPV perpetration (Du et al., 2020).

Additionally, due to the rising social tension and conflict resulting from China’s rapid economic growth and widening income inequality, China’s government has prioritized its political goal to maintain social stability. Family stability has long been seen as basic and fundamental to maintain control over society’s stability (Han, 2017). In order to maintain family stability, the Chinese government is promoting “family harmony” as a virtue all over the country. For example, the All Women’s Federation held events such as “look for the most beautiful family” and advertised “family harmony” as “family virtue” and moral values for citizens to learn. Therefore, in family disputes, even when domestic violence is present, in order to maintain and promote family and social harmony, mediation is a preferred method to handle domestic violence (Han, 2017). In China, the role of “mediator” is mostly played by people’s informal support system including family members, employers, and village and neighborhood committees. The content of the “mediation” is usually focused on saving and repairing the marital relationship instead of representing the best interests of victims. As a popular saying goes in China, “It is better to persuade the couples to stay together instead of persuading them to be separate” (*quan he bu quan li*). Recently, even though the court and policy start to intervene by legal means, mediation remains a fundamental response of their intervention strategy. As a result, police officers usually resolve domestic violence through “criticism and education,” instead of taking legal actions over abusers (Han, 2017).

5.4 Opportunities and Challenges in IPV Services in China

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing movement of activism that began to break the silence on domestic violence and campaigned for laws and services to protect and support survivors' rights and lives. The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995 and marked progressive development in the prevention and intervention on domestic violence in China. The widespread social media exposure of multiple high-profile incidents of partner abuse also raised attention from institutions and public. The issue of domestic violence has become more visible in public discourse (Tam et al., 2012).

5.4.1 *Legal Response to Domestic Violence in China*

In 2001, the revision of the Marriage Law prohibited domestic violence explicitly for the first time, which made physical abuse grounds for divorce (Palmer, 2017). In 2015, the Chinese parliament finally passed its first domestic violence law, legally defining domestic violence as both physical and emotional abuse of family members and cohabitating non-family members. The Law also introduced one of the most important protective mechanisms, i.e., the restraining order. This new Law is widely regarded as a landmark of anti-domestic violence in China and has a significant meaning to China (Han, 2017).

Though the Law was celebrated as a milestone in the development of legal protection against domestic violence, it has received wide criticism for its actual implementation (Han, 2017; Jiang, 2019). Some believe the new Law tries to achieve two potentially conflicting objectives by aiming to “stop and prevent domestic violence” while advocating for “promoting family harmony and social stability.” By emphasizing “family harmony,” the new Law still calls for informal mediation by “people’s mediation organizations,” such as village and neighborhood committees, to reduce and prevent incidents of domestic violence. Doing so, the new Law limits and undermines the full application of enforcement, thus continuing to put the victim in a serious risk (Han, 2017).

Moreover, though the new Law defines domestic violence as physical abuse and emotional abuse, it does not include sexual abuse or economic control. In addition, while the Law includes cohabiting and dating couples for the first time, it does not explicitly address issues arising from former partners (Palmer, 2017). There also are no legal protections for same-sex couples. At the implementation level, the new legislation is almost exclusively confined to married couples only. The protection toward these unmarried couples, divorced couples, and LGBTQ+ populations are still largely excluded from responsive law intervention (Yang et al., 2019).

5.4.2 Social Response to Domestic Violence in China and Its Challenges

5.4.2.1 Founding of the All Women's Federation

The All Women's Federation in China, established in 1949, is the largest women-centered organization in China. It is a semi-governmental organization which has branch organizations at each level of government (nation, province, city, town, and village) throughout the entire country (Tam et al., 2012; Zhao, 2000). It is responsible for promoting government policies on women, and protecting women's rights within the government, while liberating them from traditional norms within society and promoting women's overall status and welfare in the society. Since its founding, it has established legal aid centers, hotlines, and domestic violence report centers in every provincial and community branch (Tam et al., 2012). In addition, it also has been actively involved in the process of policy-making and law-making of anti-domestic violence (Zhao, 2000). With the new Law, the official Women's Federation, ACWF, has been increasingly vocal as an advocate for victims and provider of support services for Chinese women (Han, 2017).

However, due to the governmental nature of the Women's Federation, they are mainly responsible to the central government, instead of independently representing the growing women's needs and interests. Seen as an extension of the government and an agent for social control, the general public is often hesitant to reach them for assistance; instead, they mostly rely on their family members for support. However, due to the recent changes to the family structure because of the one-child policy, increasing number of women grew up in families without siblings or extended family network. Afraid of adding extra burdens to their aging parents, abused women are hesitant to reach out for help from their parents (Tam et al., 2012). In addition, influenced by the deeply rooted traditional beliefs about gender roles and family unity, staff members in the Women's Federation at different levels of branches, especially in the rural and small-town areas, can still hold these values when working with women. Mediation or lectures are normally used as an intervention (Tam et al., 2012).

5.4.2.2 NGOs, Social Work Development

An unprecedented growth of women's domestic violence activism and women's NGOs took off in China, especially after the fourth UN World Conference on women in 1995. They have been active in empowering women by informing, educating, and training women about their rights and necessary skills. The "Beijing-based Network/Research Center for Combating Domestic Violence (DVN)", the first women's NGO in China organized exclusively against the issue of domestic violence, was launched in Beijing in 2000 (Zhang, 2009). The women's Psychological Counseling Center, set up by a retired female Chinese journalist, has also been

active in addressing domestic violence since 1995. They provided psychological counseling to women, as well as advocated for social and policy change to provide women with legal protection from domestic violence (Zhang, 2009). Recently, social work services have been increasingly developing in China, which also presents new opportunities for anti-domestic violence in China.

However, these NGOs face a number of challenges ranging from the government's control and monitoring, limited funding, to a lack of professionally trained staff members (Tam et al., 2012). In addition, most support services are developed in urban areas, while women from rural areas have limited access to these resources (Yang et al., 2019).

5.4.2.3 Women's Shelter Development

Multiple initiatives have been made to promote the development of women's shelters. Women's groups set up the first shelters and hotlines for battered wives in the 1980s in mainland China and Hong Kong (Tang & Lai, 2008). However, overall the emergency shelters are underdeveloped and underutilized throughout the country. In 2009, less than 20 women's shelters existed in 33 provinces, and they are mostly underutilized due to a lack of follow-up service and trained staff; a limitation of allowable length of the stay; and traditional beliefs of keeping "family face" (Tam et al., 2012). Based on Tam and their colleagues' research, they suggested that the length of allowable stay is quite short, ranging from 3 days to a week. In addition, survivors are worried where they can go after the stay in the emergency shelter since usually there is not a longer-term shelter that can be provided (Tam et al., 2012).

5.4.2.4 Advocacy Intervention and Psychotherapy Treatments

Introduced from the West, the practice of counseling or psychotherapy is a relatively new phenomenon in China. The concept of "couple therapy" has only recently began to emerge and gain some exposure in the mental health field in China. While these Western-based psychotherapy models were adopted by mental health professionals in China, rarely new models of therapy congruent to Chinese families and culture were developed (Epstein et al., 2012). Specific to therapy treatments of domestic violence in China, currently, there is no mandatory psychotherapy treatment for offenders of IPV in China. Research studies about specific evidence-based systemic therapy treatment or models for couples who experience IPV and want to stay together are not available in China to the author's knowledge. Based on literature search, I only found two peer-reviewed studies about their interventions working with this population, one being on advocacy intervention for Chinese women survivors of IPV in Hong Kong (Tiwari et al., 2018) and the other one being on using expressive arts-based therapy for domestic violence survivors to cope with trauma and improve mother-child relationship in Taiwan (Lai, 2011). There are a serious lack and a high need of domestic violence therapy treatments in Mainland

China, as well as culturally congruent psychotherapy, or specific couple therapy models in China.

5.5 Conclusion

China has achieved considerable progress in the prevention and intervention of domestic violence. The new Law in 2015 was a significant breakthrough in the history of anti-domestic violence in China. Domestic violence has gradually gained attention from both the public and the government. However, China's efforts and responses to prevent and intervene in IPV are far from adequate due to a number of limitations. These limitations include traditional beliefs and values about gender roles, a narrow definition of domestic violence, over-reliance on informal mediation as an intervention strategy, limited coordination among government and social organizations, a lack of emergency shelter support for victims and professional training on IPV among service providers, and a lack of culturally congruent therapy programs or models designed for Chinese population (Tam et al., 2012). The issue of domestic violence in China continues to remain a legal, cultural, political, and social challenge in the future.

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